

Dibaajimowin 4: Resurgence through Reflection

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<http://dibaajimowin.wordpress.com/reflect>

Podcast Transcript

Probably the most important aspect of this project within the context of biskaabiiyang was the reflective conversations I had with Gitigaa-Migize at his house throughout the course of the summer. We would often talk in the early mornings over tea, at lunch, while sitting outside enjoying the evenings, or while doing an assortment of types of yard work, from finishing a sugar shack with a group of people, to fixing outhouses on his property, to cutting new trails for the next season of maple syrup harvesting. Our conversations explored colonialism, resistance, resurgence, biskaabiiyang, New Agers and how our own minds are colonized at this particular moment in time, among other topics relative to decolonization. This is key within a biskaabiiyang framework as we must evaluate how our minds are colonized and how our actions might perpetuate colonialism within our communities (Betasamosake 2011, 49). But biskaabiiyang does not stop there: we must also vision a new future by re-interpreting Anishinabek teachings within our own contexts in order to fight the on-going presence of colonialism.

This dibaajimowin is about the resurgence of Anishinabe-inaadiziwin at Gitigaa-Migize's house in Curve Lake First Nation within the context of critical self-reflection. Gitigaa-Migize's house is a site of on-going decolonization for many people, and the conversations we had there provided opportunities for decolonizing ourselves, critically analyzing the actions we engaged in within a biskaabiiyang

framework, and to discuss ideas that led to the further emergence of Anishinabe-inaadiziwin within us individually and collectively. Indeed, this process alone was a manifestation of resurgence, as it centered the Anishinabe concepts of naakgonige, or careful deliberation, discussed more below.

Several activities that started immediately when I arrived at Curve Lake persisted through the summer, which continuously providing new opportunities to contribute to my own decolonization as well as the decolonization of people around me. It became apparent that my spending so much time with Gitigaa-Migize - easily between four and five days per week - presented an opportunity to have critical conversations about the colonial context in which we find ourselves today, how people perpetuate colonialism without knowing it, and what we could work on personally to rid ourselves of colonized thinking. Gitigaa-Migize and I agreed that such conversations were valuable to where we were/are in our personal decolonization processes, and also agreed that we would share our ideas with each other about anti-colonialism. Gitigaa-Migize's wealth of Nishnaabeg knowledge and years of experience as a political and cultural leader allowed us to discuss concepts such as colonialism and decolonization within both Western and Nishnaabeg intellectual traditions; the knowledge I brought to Curve Lake from the readings and discussions I had in the Indigenous Governance program at the University of Victoria over the course of the 2010-2011 academic year, my previous academic experiences and my previous work experiences, which addressed colonialism in Indigenous community contexts for nearly a decade, allowed me to offer my own critical perspective in our discussions about colonialism and decolonization.

This is not to say that I was the only one speaking with Gitigaa-Migize about such issues, or that I spoke *only* to Gitigaa-Migize about decolonization while I was there. In fact, there was a group of people, some of whom were mentioned in previous parts of this dibaajimowin, who were actively engaged in such discussions, either one on one with me, or as a group, or without me altogether. This provided a web of relationships within which colonialism, decolonization and culturally based notions of these concepts, such as biskaabiiyang, could be shared, discussed and considered.

One key question that arose for me over the course of this project was how Nishnaabeg should fight colonialism. Is using violence appropriate within a biskaabiiyang context? Is direct action appropriate? Does biskaabiiyang mean that we should not directly challenge imperialism, instead turning the other cheek when colonial authorities or settlers assert control over Nishnaabeg people and places? I explore these questions in greater detail in the written analysis under this podcast, but mention them here because they are tied to Nishnaabeg concepts of needing to make decisions in a careful and respectful manner, and they call on us to recognize that our realities are constantly shifting, where addressing the shifting reality of neocolonialism requires that our teachings be discussed, understood in our own ways, and then applied to the processes of decolonization in order for them to live on today and tomorrow.

I spoke to Gitigaa-Migize about the concept of fighting colonialism in a direct way. He said that Nishnaabeg did and do have warriors that work for peace within our communities. But he also told me about a different kind of fighting tradition that

was rich in meaning for a biskaabiiyang decolonization framework. He spoke about the Mashkiiwenini, which he translated as roughly meaning “commandos”; these are the Nishnaabeg who are constantly “behind enemy lines” working to remove threats before they actually become a threat.¹ Their proactive work is constant in that their lives are committed to keeping the people safe. Importantly, while Mashkiiwenini were important fighters, it still took a great deal of danger for Nishnaabeg to engage in fighting. Fighting is not the first choice, but when our considerations and deliberations no longer provide alternative solutions, directly fighting a threat becomes an option.

This speaks to much of what Betasamosake (2011) has to say about the Anishinabek concepts of aanjigone and naakgonige. Aanjigone means “one needs to be very, very careful with making judgements and with the act of criticism” (54). It promotes noninterference, as it is about recognizing that if a person intentionally does something wrong, the spiritual world will take care of it. However, this does not preclude directly challenging colonialism, as Betasamosake notes, for aanjigone promotes the idea that “interrogation or critique of decisions ... is focused on the concept or decision rather than an individual” (54). Naakgonige, on the other hand, means to “carefully deliberate and decide when faced with any kind of change or decision” (56). Within a biskaabiiyang context, the combination of aanjigone and naakgonige means that we *do* fight colonialism, but we do it in carefully planned and strategic ways. This is linked to what Gitigaa-Migize was saying about dangers needing to be great before we take action: until the danger is great, we seek solutions that preclude fighting.

¹ Gitigaa-Migize. Curve Lake First Nation. 26 May 2011.

Of course, within the neocolonial context, it can be said that the dangers are indeed great. We live in a reality where our lands are occupied by settler society and backed by police and military force, where trying to exercise our responsibilities to the lands can get us arrested, or where the state criminalizes us for resisting colonialism generally. Just try to go fishing without a license today on any lake in your territory and see what the Ontario game wardens have to say about inherent rights. But within a biskaabiiyang framework for decolonization, *how* we resist is important (Betasamosake 2011, 54-5), meaning that our resistance is culturally-based when it is planned out within our intellectual and political traditions that promote balance and positive renewal.

This can be seen by drawing again on the conversation I had with Waaseya'sin in June, where she flips the concept of bubbles of safe, decolonized spaces into a concept where colonial spaces become the bubbles, representing a vision for the long-term future of Nishnaabeg resurgence and freedom. Here is a clip from that conversation:

Damien Lee: We often hear about resistance and resurgence theorized as, you need, on the outside you need to be resisting and pushing, so on the inside you have this safe space. ... But I do recognize and appreciate the concept of when you're in these kind of places, regardless of whats happening on the outskirts of it, this *is* kind of a safe space where you can just live as, and be as, and do as Anishinabeg, right?

Waaseya'sin: Leanne, in one of Leanne's pieces she presented at the Poetics [Conference], - and that was a great metaphor for me - it was, she talked about the bubbles, from the heart of the river, and that she, the more of those bubbles, decolonized spaces, those bubbles she could have, or even if she could just be in there for one or two minutes or something, its just, its a little bit of something, right.

And that was such a great metaphor for me, because I feel like, you know how bubbles, sometimes you get a big bubble and then another one comes and joins? I don't want my life to be just a bunch of little bubbles. Right? I'd rather have those colonial spaces to be a bunch of little bubbles, and then everything else just be Anishinabe, right.²

This is the kind of resurgence I am working towards. It is not enough to settle for safe spaces while the colonial context continues unabated - a process that, by nature, would result in the eventual assimilation of Indigenous peoples and their places. Rather, we must vision beyond that which the state has given us: we are put into spaces that are *safe for settler society*. Waaseya'sin's visioning is careful, strategic and long-term; her statement here goes beyond being happy with hand-outs.

The conversations I had with people like Gitigaa-Migize, Waaseya'sin and others expanded my own mind within a biskaabiiyang framework, and I hope that I was able to offer them some interesting ideas to think about as well. What is key, however, is that engaging in critical conversations with an eye to decolonization,

² This conversation took place on 17 June 2011 at Curve Lake First Nation.

including helping each other decolonize ourselves, provides an important space for resurgence; while creating safe spaces gives us the opportunity to be exposed to teachings, conversations allow us to reflect on the teachings and evaluate how they fit within our own lives. Conversation is one seed for resurgence; our job then is to embody the new understandings in our own lives.

Analysis: Evaluation and Reflection

Conversations were a key part of how I contributed to the Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg community as well as to how new ideas came to me during this project. The discussions I had with Gitigaa-Migize often centered on raising consciousness about how our minds are colonized, which subsequently led to conversations about what we could do to ensure the spaces we were creating were more safe for Anishinabe resurgence opposed to perpetuating colonialism. This is a key part of biskaabiiyang as a decolonizing methodology: we must evaluate our personal and collective actions for the ways we contribute to colonialism *in addition to* the ways in which our actions contribute to the resurgence of Anishinabe-inaadiziwin. I agree with Betasamosake (2011) when she notes that biskaabiiyang requires an “interrogation or critique of decisions ... focused on the concept or decision rather than an individual” (54): our anti-colonial conversations should be broad enough to bring everyone together so our reflections can begin to change our actions. While the other podcasts and analyses explore those the external actions we did, this analysis shares with you some of the ways in which conversations created internally safe spaces to prepare me and others for deepened, more decolonized decolonization work.

Conversations can be safe spaces in and of themselves. Indeed, within a decolonizing research framework, conversations provide a space that decenter the academy and privilege instead the relationship between a knowledge holder and a knowledge seeker (Kovach 2009). This can be seen, for example, by the way in which conversations within this project allowed me to move around the problems of outsider / insider research, noted by Linda Smith (1999) to be problematic in that

an Indigenous person who is part of an Indigenous community s/he is researching suddenly is asking questions that fit within the framework of the academy as opposed to being purely based within community (137-40). Conversation, however, addresses this binary by recognizing that the knowledge holder is also a learner and that the knowledge seeker might also have something important to contribute to a discussion about decolonization. Furthermore, conversation fits within biskaabiiyang as a tool for decolonization as it promotes careful deliberation, which can be found in the Anishinabe teaching of naakgonige (Betasamosake 2011, 56-8). Conversation thus becomes a facilitator of resurgence and decolonization, making use of each person's unique perspectives and knowledges instead of promoting hierarchies.

One of the key aspects of this project is the creation of safe spaces, which became a characteristic of the conversations I had with Gitigaa-Migize. While most of our work throughout this project focused on creating safe spaces for other people to connect with Anishinabe-gikendaasowin and inaadiziwin, the conversations I had with Gitigaa-Migize between events were safe spaces created for ourselves. Indeed, we agreed continuously that neither of our thinking is untouched by cognitive imperialism. Between events, however, we would discuss the ways in which our actions in past events might have contributed to perpetuating colonialism, and how we might be able to avoid this in future events. This was a process of first identifying threads of colonized thinking/acting within ourselves, which relied on discussing those threads at length, and then discussing how Anishinabe-inaadiziwin might be prioritized in future situations in order to promote

resurgence of Anishinabe-inaadiziwin instead of assimilation or behaviour that otherwise perpetuates the colonial status quo.

For example, there were two on-going conversations that took place throughout this project that demonstrated our commitment to identifying colonial thinking in our actions. These on-going discussions provided a platform for us to reflect on how our actions in future situations could promote Anishinabe-inaadiziwin. The first thread of conversation began with the altercation we had with the municipal worker while we were collecting leeks in May (which is discussed in greater detail in the third podcast on this blog site). Over the summer, Gitigaa-Migize and I discussed at length the implications of our actions within a decolonizing framework, with the most recent discussion happening on August 10. When the municipal worker asserted his presumed authority, Gitigaa-Migize made fun of him, turning his authority into parody. Surely, this did not dismantle the worker's authority within a neocolonial system that still oppresses Nishnaabeg, but it did upset that authority for a few minutes and allowed us to go home without being arrested or physically assaulted that day.

But was this the most decolonizing action we could have taken? Would it have been more decolonizing to physically fight that municipal worker on the grounds that we had inherent Anishinabe rights and responsibilities to be on that land on that particular day? Gitigaa-Migize told me later that he wished he was younger, as this would have changed the way in which he addressed the situation, where he possibly would have physically challenged that worker in some way; in my own case, I felt incredibly unsure about what the right action was for me to take -

including whether to join the argument, physically fight the worker, or some other action to challenge his power - which resulted in me being frozen instead of confident.

Nishnaabeg *do* fight, and we *are* fighting colonialism every day. Whether this fighting and resistance takes the form of putting food on the table for our children when settler society tells us that we are not good enough to work, or setting up roadblocks to stop logging in our traditional territories, our resistance is on-going and real. Within anti-colonialism, it is no surprise then that sometimes violence and direct action become useful if not inescapable tools within a broader strategy predicated on achieving a non-colonial world. This is seen in some of the most radical anti-colonial writings, such as Frantz Fanon's (2004) poignant statement that "decolonization is always a violent phenomenon" (1), or in the anti-imperial, anti-colonial, anti-civilization works of Derrick Jensen (2006), who says that we need to bring down Western infrastructure as soon as humanly possible to begin the healing process for all life on earth.

In the end, however, we did not decide on what action would have been better, as there were a variety of actions that could have been taken during the altercation with the municipal worker. However, we *did* participate in resurgence as a result of this experience: we engaged naakgonige by critically reflecting on how that situation affected us, the options we might have had, and the ways in which we might address something like this in the future. The resurgence here is that the careful deliberation we engaged in over the summer allowed us to consider all the options and to learn from them, constituting a safe space for us to speak to each

other from the heart. Personally, this on-going discussion influenced the way in which I will address similar situations in the future: instead of freezing because I do not know what to do, I hope to engage in challenging colonial power in a way that embodies Anishinabe-inaadiziwin. This is a resurgence of a teaching within me, as it is my hope that my future actions will embody the reflections found within the conversations I had with Gitigaa-Migize about facing colonial authorities.

The second thread of conversation useful to demonstrating the importance of critical reflection within a biskaabiiyang framework focuses on questioning how safe the academy is for Anishinabek. While my work during this project did not directly address the academy in and of itself, both Gitigaa-Migize and I work within the academy in a significant way: I am a Master's student, he is the Director of Studies for Trent University's Indigenous Studies Ph.D. Program. Thus the academy as a topic naturally arose in our discussions; I often talked about the issue of settlers not actively undermining or addressing their settler privilege within Indigenous Studies/Native Studies programs, which many believe should be academic spaces designed to promote decolonization. Indeed, like many spaces that are meant to be safe for Indigenous peoples, Indigenous Studies/Native Studies academic programs can become dominated by settlers who are not willing to accept that they have privileges within a neocolonial society, thereby bringing those privileges into such spaces at the cost of Anishinabe resurgence.

Such an position is predicated on the idea that it is possible for neocolonial society to be blind to differences in race and to Indigenous-settler power dynamics that facilitate settler privilege in larger Canadian society at the cost of Anishinabe lives.

This is problematic because, as Leonardo and Porter (2010) have discussed, the trend within spaces that do not take a critical position on racial and colonial privilege is to create spaces proclaimed to be 'comfortable for everyone', while such spaces actually come at expense of Indigenous peoples' safety; Leonardo and Porter (2010) note that "Part of color-blindness is to demand that race dialogue takes place in a 'safe' environment. [In these spaces, however,] the higher goal of understanding and fighting racism is exchanged for creating a safe space where whites can avoid publicly 'looking racist', which then overwhelms their reasons for participating in racial dialogue, [leaving] intact what bell hooks has called the 'terrorizing force of white supremacy', even within the context of safety" (139).

Applying this analysis to Indigenous Studies and Native Studies programs as potential places of safety for Anishinabek within the academy, we see that it is not simply enough to create the physical academic space and hope for decolonization to occur. Instead, in addition to the creation of such academic space, critical discussion needs to take place to ensure Indigenous Studies/Native Studies programs actually contribute to decolonization instead of merely producing well-informed bureaucrats or company executives whose professional goals in fact *necessitate* state structured oppression of Anishinabek. The shift towards making such spaces actually safe for Anishinabek begins with establishing academic spaces where critical reflection about settler privilege is made visible so that settlers in these spaces can begin to undermine their privilege in a way that supports Indigenous peoples' resurgence. When the status quo of colonialism in broader Canadian society is not challenged in smaller spaces such as those within the academy, we in the academy become complicit in maintaining colonialism.

The discussions I had with Gitigaa-Migize about the academy as a safe or dangerous place for Anishinabek had an impact on our thinking. We were able to see some of the deeper problems with settler privilege in Indigenous spaces. Though this project came to an end before the beginning of the 2011-2012 academic year, Gitigaa-Migize told me that this thread of conversation really helped him articulate some of what he feels to be problematic with the academy as a space for Anishinabek. He is in a position where he might be able to bring this topic to the fore in future opportunities.

Through the many conversations I had with Gitigaa-Migize, I was able to share and learn a great deal with respect to decolonization and resurgence. Conversations were the spaces that my reflections could be voiced and shared with others, and allowed my thinking to change over time. They helped me to transcend my feelings of being frozen by colonial authority while also bringing out new ideas as we reflected on how we could best support resurgence.